DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 236 938 FL 014 095

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TITLE Discourse Analysis as a Pedagogical Tool.
INSTITUTION California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
PUB DATE 13 Mar 83
NOTE 13p.; In its: CATESOL Occasional Papers, Number 9, p.74-85, Fall 1983; Paper presented at the CATESOL State Conference (Sacramento, CA, March 13, 1982).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Connected Discourse; *Discourse Analysis; *English (Second Language); Higher Education; Second Language Instruction; Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

A principal cause of the seeming "foreignness" in the compositions of English as a second language (ESL) university students is discussed, and an approach to correcting the problem is suggested. It is asserted that the English language compositions of ESL students reflect native language rhetorical norms which are culturally based. Discourse bloc analysis is recommended as a tool for teaching the rhetorical norms of English expository prose. Written discourse patterns in a given language can be analyzed, characterized, and taught. University ESL curricula can provide students with the means of categorizing English expository prose on a continuum from acceptable to unacceptable which will ultimately lead to a reduction of the foreignness in their essays. Discourse bloc analysis involves the graphic depiction of errors in units of meaning, usually paragraphs, known as discourse blocs. The semantic relatedness of sentences within a bloc is depicted by block signals, devices which connect the sentences and contribute to the necessary linearity of discourse. (Author/RW)

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California Association
Teachers of English to
Speakers of Other Languages

CATESOL Occasional Papers
Number 9 (Fall, 1983)

ED236938

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

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This paper addresses a principal cause of "foreignness" in the composition of ESL university students and suggests an approach and a method for dealing with the problem. The hypothesis can be stated as follows:

(1) The compositions of many ESL students reflect L1 rhetorical norms which are culturally based;

(2) Rhetorical norms of English expository prose can be revealed using Discourse Bloc Analysis.

Therefore, by using discourse analysis as a discovery tool, ESL composition students will be able to assess an important cause of "foreignness" in their own writing, and will have available a mechanism to guide the organization and writing of their academic papers.

This paper was presented at the 1982 CATESOL State Conference in Sacramento, March 13, 1982.

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Although university-level ESL students seem to achieve well in listening, speaking and reading, generally speaking, the mastery of formal academic writing skills appears to be a major cause of frustration, not only for the student, but for the instructor as well. In the teaching of writing skills, vocabulary, syntax and spelling deficiencies may be corrected, yet there is something "not quite right" about a student's paper. Often there appears to be a breakdown in the order of ideas or the structure of the argument; supports to a thesis may be related, but not relevant; the main point of the essay may be alluded to, but not stated, or may surface at or near the conclusion. These weaknesses often exist even though the student has been competently instructed in essay styles and structure. This more subtle, deeper deficiency, or "foreignness," in an essay appears to be related to a discourse breakdown between writer and reader. Indeed, as Kaplan (1966: 401 in Croft) has stated, "the foreign student paper is (frequently) out of focus because the foreign student is employing a rhetoric and a sequence of thought which violate the expectations of the native reader."

Studies by Clyne (1981), Harder (1980), Martin (1980), Dahbi (1980), Kaplan (1972, 1978), Ostler (1979) and McDaniel (1981) have provided evidence that many of the determiners of coherence in written discourse vary across cultures and languages, and that attitudes towards the function of writing, including self-expression, may influence the form as well as the content of foreign students' writing in English. The above studies have used contrastive rhetoric procedures to identify the nature and source of foreignness in ESL compositions, and have sensitized instructors to culturally influenced rhetorical patterns in student writing.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that: (a) since written discourse patterns in a language (such as English) can be analyzed and characterized, they can also be taught and learned; (b) university ESL curricula can provide students with the means of categorizing English expository prose (including their own) on a continuum from acceptable to unacceptable which will ultimately lead to a reduction of the "foreignness" in their essays. To accomplish this purpose, we shall first examine, in more detail, the reasons why ESL student essays seem to be out of focus, and then discuss an analytical discourse procedure known as Discourse Bloc Analysis.

Causes of Foreignness in ESL Student Writing

If reading is to be considered a "psycholinguistic guessing game," as has been posited by Goodman (1970), then readers and writers of English prose have certain built-in expectations about the ordering of ideas in any stretch of discourse. In other words, the reader shares the same expectations of what is to follow what as does the writer. As an example, in English ideas are often presented linearly from general to

specific. This "Hierarchical Ordering" is most common in formal academic writing and thus is of prime importance in any effective transfer of information within an English framework (McDaniel, 1981). An example of this type of ordering, and of how shared expectations contribute to the understanding of complex material follows.

> Language universals, Chomsky (1965) suggests, are of two basic types, substantive and formal. Substantive universals represent the fundamental 'building blocks' of language, the substance out of which it is made, while formal universals are concerned with the form or shape of a grammar. An analogy might make this distinction clearer. If, hypothetically, Eskimos were born with an innate knowledge of igloo building, they would have two kinds of knowledge. On the one hand, they would know in advance that the substance out of which igloos are made is ice and snow, just as thrushes automatically know that their nests are made of twigs, not bricks, or worms, or glass. On the other hand, their innate knowledge of igloo building would include the information that igloos are round in shape, not square, or diamond-shaped, or sausage-like, just as thrushes instinctively build round nests, not ones shaped like bathtubs (Aitchison 1977)

This passage typifies the linear ordering of ideas characteristic of English expository prose. The first sentence creates a culturally shared mind-set about what the set of acceptable second sentences might be. The remainder of the passage is logically predictable -- that is the reader has "bought-into" an organizational framework in which all ideas in the paragraph will (1) be related to the agenda set forth in the topic (first) sentence, and (2) will be ordered according to the blueprint set forth in the topic sentence, (i.e., comments relating to substantive universals will precede those relating to formal universals). Martin (1980), however, has shown that ESL students performed significantly below native English speaking students in their ability to distinguish this organizational framework. Thus ESL students may not have the same built-in expectations of the ordering of ideas as do native English speakers. It might be that the expectations of ESL students concerning the attributes of good writing could also vary considerably, frequently reflecting the social, political and/or religious values of their native culture.

A number of studies have been conducted which support this conclusion. Dahbi (1980:5) shows that, whereas native English speaking teachers expected students to "express ideas clearly and economically," EFL students at the Mohamed V University, Morocco, considered "beauty, elegance, and linguistic craftsmanship to be more important." These views were expressed in the students overuse of "pre-fabs" (Bolinger 1976) and idiomatic

expressions, and in the teachers overuse of the red pen. Likewise, teachers expected students to "compose within the conventions of written English" (Dahbi 1980:15) -- one such convention being a distance between writer and reader. Students, however, saw their role as involving the reader in a friendly, conversational style. Thus before a student with such expectations can hope to write acceptable English academic prose, some significant adjustment of these expectations must occur.

This violation of expectations also occurs in a number of other variations. Ostler (1979) in a comparison of English essays written by native English speakers with those written by native Arabic speakers shows that the Arab students were significantly influenced by rhetorical norms typically found in their L1 (for example, overuse -- from an English perspective -- of parallelism and coordinate structures). Ostler suggests that the Koranic style is the model emulated by literate Arabs -- no matter which language the writer may be operating in. In a paper presented at the 25th International Conference of Orientalists in Japan, Harder (1980:11) investigates the relationship between discourse patterns and cultural values by examining weaknesses in English essays written by Japanese students. Among other conclusions he reports that Japanese students "complain that giving the impression of objective truth in their essays makes them feel too arrogant and exposed," which may be the result of deep culturally-bound concepts of the self. Foreign students, then, may be influenced by their own culture to write within a particular rhetorical framework which could help to explain the apparent difficulty many ESL students experience in functioning competently in the English rhetorical style; for, in effect, the students are being asked to reject a portion of their own culture and replace it with a portion of the English speaking culture.

Harder (1980) wonders if such a sensitive undertaking is desirable and suggests that, rather than expect the foreign student to adapt, native English speaking evaluators of foreign student writings should concentrate more on content than on style. Clyne (1980) provides evidence for the concept that such a change in examiner's attitutes is highly unlikely. He reviewed a Victorian (Australia) Higher School Certificate Examiner's Reports for 1972, 1974, 1977 and 1978 and found that the general reason for failure among students was not a lack of knowledge, but rather the manner in which that knowledge was presented -- in short, the discourse structure of the answer. This held true both for the native English speaking population and the significant non-native English speaking population of the area. Thus, if instructors are to help students succeed in a real-world academic environment, they must find an effective way to help students master the English rhetorical pattern. Considering the cultural sensitivity of such an enterprise, it would seem that utilizing Friere-style self-discovery techniques would be an efficient means of achieving that objective. In this connection, a method using Discourse Bloc Analysis may facilitate a self-discovery process. Before

examining this method, however, a brief discussion of Discourse Analysis and Bloc Analysis is in order.

Discourse Analysis

Little attention had been paid to the systematic analysis of written discourse beyond the sentence level prior to the 1960's. Following the work of Frances Christensen (1967), Willis Pitkin (1968) developed the discourse bloc unit as an index in order to describe or capture structural properties of texts. Pitkin, however, dealt only with the analysis of English discourse. It was Robert Kaplan who first applied Pitkin's model in the analysis of rhetorical patterns across cultures (1966), arguing that the organization of ideas in written discourse is culturally influenced. Kaplan provided schematic characterizations for a variety of organizational modes typical of English, Semitic, Oriental, Romance and Russian (Kaplan 1966). His insights stimulated further research in the area of contrastive rhetoric and led to the publication in 1972 of his book The Anatomy of Rhetoric: Prolegomena to a Functional Theory of Rhetoric, as well as a spate of articles by other applied linguists in the U. S., Britain, Canada, and Australia. This spate of research has shown Discourse Bloc Analysis to be an effective tool in analyzing English prose.

Discourse Bloc Analysis is comprised of a number of major components. Within a text there are units of meaning (frequently divided into paragraphs, but not necessarily restricted to such a division) which constitute a Discourse Bloc. Typically, this unit is controlled by a topic sentence. Subsequent sentences within the Bloc bear either a coordinate, subordinate, or superordinate relationship to the topic sentence and to each other. The semantic relatedness of items within the Bloc is depicted by Bloc signals -- devices which connect these structures to one another, and which "contribute to the necessary linearity of discourse that is considered good by the community of English speakers" (Kaplan 1976). The subsequent outline (Discourse Bloc Analysis) will graphically depict in what manner and to what degree a writer has successfully articulated his ideas in a given stretch of discourse. Over -- or under -- use of Bloc signals, violation of readers' expectations -- in short, to a breakdown in communication of one degree or another. As we will see in Figures 1 and 2, Discourse Bloc Analysis provides a graphic means for spotting those errors in the discourse which impede communication between writer and reader, and through continued use should also provide the foreign student with a means of recognizing problems in his own writing, as well as a general framework within which to organize and execute his writing.

Figure 1 shows an analysis of a paragraph from a text which follows the hierarchical linear order characteristic of academic expository prose. This paragraph was written by an ESL student

and has not been edited.

Another analysis of a paragraph which does not follow the hierarchical order is given in Figure 2. This paragraph was also written by an ESL student and has not been edited.

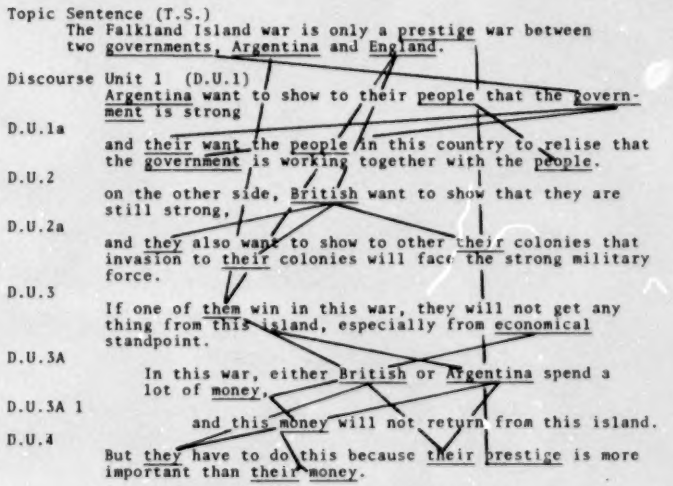
Discourse Bloc Analysis, then, is an attempt to describe the process of text development; it differs from the more common approach which identifies the various discrete aspects of, for instance, a paragraph, without considering the underlying logico-semantic relationships which determine, in fact, what the text means.

Figure 1.

The Falkland Island War.

The Falkland Island War is only a prestige war between two governments, Argentina and England. Argentina want to show to their people that the government is strong and their want the people in this country to relise that the government is working together with the people. On the other side, British wants to show that they are still strong, and they also want to show to other their colonies that invasion to their colonies will face the strong military force. If one of them win in this war, they will not get anything from this island, especially from economical standpoint. In this war either British or Argentina spend a lot of money, and this money will not return from this island. But they have to do this because their prestige is more important than their money.

Discourse Bloc Analysis


Topic Sentence (T.S.)
The Falkland Island war is only a prestige war between two governments, Argentina and England.
Discourse Unit 1 (D.U.1)
Argentina want to show to their people that the government is strong
D.U.1a
and their want the people in this country to relise that the government is working together with the people.
D.U.2
on the other side, British want to show that they are still strong,
D.U.2a
and they also want to show to other their colonies that invasion to their colonies will face the strong military force.
D.U.3
If one of them win in this war, they will not get any thing from this island, especially from economical standpoint.
D.U.3A
In this war, either British or Argentina spend a lot of money,
D.U.3A 1
and this money will not return from this island.
D.U.4
But they have to do this because their prestige is more important than their money.

Notes.

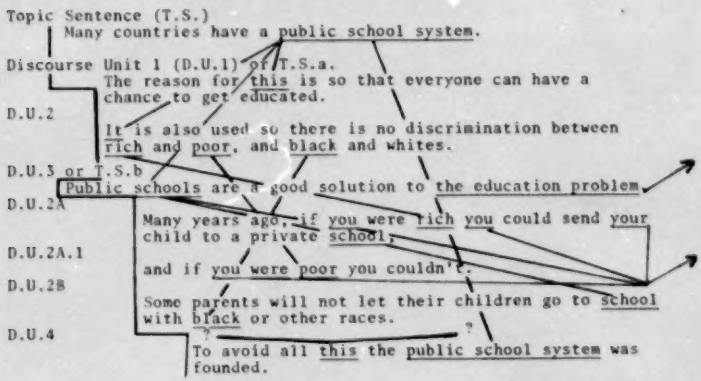
The analysis shows that the Bloc has a clear topic sentence and the argument proceeds from general to specific through coordination and subordination.

Figure 2.

Public School.

Many countries have a public school system. The reason for this is so that everyone can have a chance to get educated. It is also used so there is no discrimination between rich and poor, and black and whites. Public schools are a good solution to the education problem. Many years ago, if you were rich you could send your child to a private school, and if you were poor you couldn't. Some parents will not let their children go to school with black or other races. To avoid all this the public school system was founded.

Discourse Bloc Analysis


Topic Sentence (T.S.)
Many countries have a public school system.
Discourse Unit 1 (D.U.1) of T.S.a.
The reason for this is so that everyone can have a chance to get educated.
D.U.2
It is also used so there is no discrimination between rich and poor, and black and whites.
D.U.3 or T.S.b
Public schools are a good solution to the education problem.
D.U.2A
Many years ago, if you were rich you could send your child to a private school,
D.U.2A.1
and if you were poor you couldn't.
D.U.2B
Some parents will not let their children go to school with black or other races.
D.U.4
?
?
To avoid all this the public school system was founded.

Notes.

The above analysis is one of a number of variations which could be shown because it is not clear which sentence is the topic sentence. It may first appear to be T.S. Analysis, however, shows that the major idea development focuses on D.U.2 which has the most subordination and coordination in the Bloc. Semantic reference also shows that D.U.2 may be the main idea the writer is trying to convey. D.U.1 and D.U.3 introduce new aspects of the theme, but are not supported by the remainder of the paragraph. There is no clear development of ideas and the reader is left with a vague notion of the purpose of the Bloc.

Discourse Bloc Analysis as a Pedagogical Tool

A major benefit of research in Discourse Bloc Analysis concerns the potential for heightened awareness instructors may gain of the complexity of factors affecting student performance. Instructors can recognize that their foreign students are trying to function in a totally different cultural environment, even when they write in the most comfortable and compassionate settings.

In order to investigate the actual in-class teaching potential of Discourse Bloc Analysis, a number of procedures which used Discourse Bloc Analysis to help students recognise discourse in written passages and eventually to write with an acceptable rhetorical style were developed and tested at the American Language Institute, University of Southern California.

The A.L.I. program for intermediate students consists of 12 hours a week of "English for Academic Purposes" instruction per 16 week semester. A major focus of the program is on academic writing with an emphasis on helping students attain a competence (better than the mid-point on a stanine scale applied subjectively) in writing three to five paragraph essays. Although individual teachers employ various techniques, the standard teaching pattern seems to include instruction in general-to-specific movement, the generation of topic and thesis sentences, the provision of supports to a thesis, the use of academic argumentative style, the use of transitional devices, and the provision of a summary and/or conclusion.

In an attempt to improve student performance, a method was developed where the focus was not on the teaching of the elements of discourse, but rather on allowing the students, through Discourse Analysis, to discover for themselves the qualities of good English academic rhetoric. The method was tested in two classes, one intermediate and one lower intermediate. The assumption was made that, if students could distinguish between standard and non-standard discourse, they would then be better able to approximate standard discourse patterns in their own writings. A number of objectives and teaching strategies were devised in order to test this assumption.

The initial step was to show the students discourse blocs similar to those found in Figures 1 and 2. A step-by-step simplified discourse bloc analysis was conducted with each paragraph with the instructor emphasizing acceptable and non-acceptable discourse features such as linear presentation of ideas, subordination, coordination, lexical chaining, and pronominal reference. In later sessions, students were encouraged to participate in a discussion of the cohesive elements of the passages using discourse analysis as a framework. Students seemed to be able to grasp the purpose of this type of activity and, in most cases, were able to contribute much to the discussion.

After the instructor felt that students were capable of independent analysis, another set of paragraphs was given to each student. Students were instructed to evaluate each paragraph, once again using discourse analysis as a framework. It must be emphasized that the instructors did not expect students to perform complex discourse analyses of the texts, but rather the expectation was that students would be able to identify certain semantic and syntactic cohesive features (including lexical chaining, reference, subordination and coordination) using basic, but effective discourse analysis strategies. Groups were than formed with the students being encouraged to share their evaluations and discuss the acceptable and non-acceptable features of the paragraphs. This process was repeated until all students were able to make competent evaluations based on the discourse features of the paragraph.

A final test of students' abilities was to give each student a set of paragraphs and ask for a discourse evaluation of each. All students were able to distinguish basic discourse features with some students showing surprising sophistication and detail in their critiques. At no time did the instructors "teach" the discrete elements of discourse; rather, these elements were indirectly revealed through the discourse analysis in a more holistic approach. It was hoped that students would be led to discover for themselves the elements of acceptable rhetoric. Up to this point the process had taken 3 hours per week for 4 weeks of class time.

The final objective was to encourage students to apply this discourse analysis process to their own writings. Students were given a number of writing assignments (paragraphs) over a 4 week period, and, upon completion of each, asked to evaluate their assignment. It was hoped that this self-analysis would allow students to edit their own writing and make necessary adjustments in the discourse structure of the text. The assignment was then evaluated by the student and the instructor with a Discourse Bloc Analysis being the method of evaluation. It was found that students were able to perceive weaknesses and make satisfactory changes in later rewriting stages because both instructor and student had a common basis of expectations -- a shared knowledge of rhetorical style. This evaluation process was most rewarding as it seemed that there was real understanding between instructor and student. The latter half of the semester was devoted to writing 3 to 5 paragraph essays with the discourse analysis process continuing.

The American Language Institute uses an in-class essay assignment as one of its final evaluation criteria. These essays are graded independently by instructors from other A.L.I. sections so that two individual scores and one composite score

are given. Comparisons were made between the results from the two classes that received the discourse instruction and nine other classes that received other forms of instruction in essay techniques. It was found that the average grade for the two classes was slightly higher than it was for the other classes. This was especially pleasing since one of the new-method classes began the semester at a lower intermediate level. An examination of the essays from this class showed that, even though there were more grammar and spelling errors than in essays from the regular classes, the essays followed acceptable rhetorical patterns which may have accounted for their high evaluations (on the grounds that examiners may have placed more emphasis on rhetorical style than on superficial deficiencies). Even though two graders evaluated these essays (with a high degree of rater reliability), it was decided that any attempt to apply rigid statistical comparisons between the new-method classes, and the other classes would be invalid owing to the underlying subjectivity of the grading procedure. At this point it is sufficient to say that, according to the evaluation techniques employed by the American Language Institute, students from the two experimental classes performed as well as, or better than, students from the other classes. End of semester evaluations of the teachers and program indicated that the students were very positive in their attitude towards the writing phase of the new-method classes.

Conclusion

We have seen that foreignness in student writing is often caused by the mapping of culturally based L_1 rhetorical styles onto the discourse of the target language (in this case English). It has also been argued that a prime responsibility of an ESL composition instructor is to help students approximate English rhetorical norms in their academic writing. In an attempt to accomplish this task, an approach and method using discourse analysis as a tool to aid students in a self-discovery process was developed and tested. Initial results would indicate that this approach merits further study and development, and may well contribute significantly to a more effective means of achieving a higher level of academic written performance in ESL intermediate and advanced level classes.

Some further areas of development and research might include the evolution of more simplified formats of Discourse Bloc Analysis so that students may more easily grasp the discourse structure of a text. There also appears to be a need to create more exercises that teach such discourse relationships as linear ordering.

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